India's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy: An Ontological Security Perspective Rooted in Civilizational Legacy

Col K C Monnappa[1]

Abstract

India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is an ongoing diplomatic and ideological endeavour rooted in its civilizational ethos and commitment to maintaining ontological security — a sense of continuity and identity in a complex international landscape. This study examines how India's historical experiences, cultural narratives, and civilizational legacy form a distinctive framework that influences its foreign policy decisions and its resistance to hegemonic alignments. Anchored in the concept of ontological security, this approach explores how India's self-conception, drawn from principles like Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) and strategic nonalignment, provides a foundation for its autonomous stance amidst global power shifts. Through analysis of India's engagements with multilateral organizations, alliances, and its selective partnerships, this paper reveals how India negotiates its identity against the backdrop of external pressures and global expectations. The study suggests that India's diplomatic strategies are not merely responses to immediate geopolitical threats but are deeply embedded in its historical narratives and normative beliefs. Thus, India's path to strategic autonomy underscores an intrinsic quest for ontological security, enabling it to navigate the evolving international system with a uniquely Indian approach.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy, Ontological Security, Civilizational Legacy, India's Foreign Policy.

[1] PhD Researcher Scholar, Department of Political Science, Northeastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, Meghalaya

Introduction

Foreign policy is a complex articulation of national priorities, balancing a state's practical goals with its ideational values [2], historical context, and position within the global order. While conventional approaches to foreign policy prioritize material interests, power calculations, and security concerns, the role of national identity and the concept of "self" are equally vital in shaping a state's diplomatic posture. Identity, a critical construct in sociology and International Relations (IR), defines a state's unique characteristics, values, and its historical trajectory, profoundly influencing its approach to both bilateral and multilateral relations (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Wendt, 1992). This understanding of self not only impacts the formulation of a nation's foreign policy goals but also sculpts the pathway through which it engages with the world, offering a stable ideological foundation even as the state's strategies adapt to shifting geopolitical landscapes. In IR, identity operates as a cognitive and affective lens[3], influencing how a nation perceives itself in relation to others.

According to Wendt (1992), identity is not merely a passive reflection of a nation's culture or history but a dynamic construct [4] shaped through continuous interactions and self-perceptions. This identity becomes "embedded" over time [5], forming the ideological basis for a nation's roles, responsibilities, and legitimate interests. Consequently, identity-driven policies provide states with a powerful source of legitimacy [6], as nations project their self-concept [7] through diplomatic engagements, alliances, and policies that align with their perceived values (Adler & Barnett, 1998).

The construction of a coherent "self-narrative" [8] is intrinsic to crafting foreign policy. A state that views itself as a "defender of democracy" is likely to embed democratic principles within its foreign policy, thereby aligning its goals with broader ideological imperatives. In contrast, a nation that sees itself as a regional power may focus on projecting its influence over neighbouring states, supporting foreign policy initiatives that underscore this self-image.

---

[2] These are concepts and principles that reflect a nation's beliefs and ideals, which guide its behaviour and interactions on the global stage. Amitav Acharya (2001), in his book 'Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order' discusses how ideational values shape regional security dynamics.

[3] This is a framework that combines rational understanding (cognitive) and emotional responses (affective) to interpret experiences and formulate policies, affecting how states understand their identity and roles. See Identity and Foreign Policy: The Role of Identity in International Relations by David Campbell (1998).

[4] It is the idea that identity is not static but evolves over time through interactions and experiences with other states and actors in the international arena. For more insights see Social Theory of International Relations by Alexander Wendt (1999).

[5] The notion that a state's identity becomes ingrained in its political culture and historical narratives, influencing long-term policies and actions.

[6] General belief that a state's actions are appropriate, justified, and acceptable within the international community, often derived from its identity and values.

[7] I describe this as the perception a state has of itself, including its identity, values, and role in the world, which shapes its foreign policy decisions.

[8] A self-narrative refers to the story a nation tells about itself, which shapes its identity and influences its behaviour in the international arena. It encompasses historical experiences, cultural values, and collective memories that define how a state sees itself and its role in the world. Narratives of Nationhood: The Representation of History in the Political Discourse of Post-Soviet Russia by Mikhail Suslov (2017) discusses how nations construct narratives that shape their identities.

Identity thus operates as an underlying determinant in foreign policy formation, often as influential as a nation's material assets in the diplomatic arena (Wendt, 1999). In states that conceive of themselves as "beacons of democracy,"[9] "cultural leaders,"[10] or "resistance states,"[11] these ideological frameworks act as cognitive anchors [12] guiding and shaping their foreign policy choices.

Nye's (2004) concept of "soft power," [13] further illustrates how a nation's self-identity can actively shape global perceptions, deploying values, culture, and ideologies as tools for influence. The foreign policy of the United States and most European nations, which often invoke their democratic identity to justify alliances and interventions, exemplifies how state values permeate its external engagements. Conversely, Germany and Japan's post-World War II diplomacy has embraced pacifism and economic cooperation,

reflecting a redefined self-concept that prioritizes peaceful engagement over military prowess (Pyle, 2007). Such identity frameworks, once established, tend to be resistant to change, shaping a consistent foreign policy ethos that remains influential despite evolving administrations and global conditions.

In bilateral relations, identity plays a crucial role in shaping interactions between "self" and "other." [14] Campbell (1998) describes this as a process of "othering," where a state reinforces its own identity by distinguishing itself from others. Bilateral diplomacy thus transcends mere strategic calculations, as identity-based considerations influence national stances, making certain compromises unpalatable and reinforcing adversarial postures. In the multilateral sphere, identity similarly determines a nation's engagement with international organisations, treaties, and alliances. [15] Constructivist scholars argue that

---

[9] This phrase describes states that view themselves as models of democratic governance and advocates for democratic principles globally. Such nations often believe it is their responsibility to promote democracy and human rights in other countries. See The Democratic Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace by Steven Pinker (2018).

[10] Cultural leaders are states that see themselves as custodians or promoters of cultural values and norms, often aspiring to influence global culture through soft power, such as art, language, and education.

[11] Resistance states are countries that define themselves in opposition to perceived imperialism or hegemonic influences, often positioning themselves as champions of sovereignty and anti-colonialism in their foreign policy.

[12] Cognitive anchors are stable beliefs or frameworks that guide a state's decision-making processes in foreign policy. These anchors help states interpret international events and respond consistently according to their self-concept and identity.

[13] Soft power refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. It encompasses cultural, ideological, and diplomatic means, allowing states to shape preferences and garner

support by promoting their values and policies. Joseph Nye introduced this concept to highlight the importance of non-military tools in international relations. See Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. New York: Public Affairs.

[14] In the study of international relations, the concepts of "self" and "other" refer to how states perceive themselves (self) in relation to other states (other). The "self" embodies a nation's identity, values, and interests, while the "other" represents foreign states or entities that are seen as different or distinct. This binary framework is essential in understanding bilateral relations, as it influences how countries interact, negotiate, and form alliances, often leading to either cooperative or adversarial dynamics. The perception of identity can lead to the construction of narratives that justify actions and shape policies toward the "other."

[15] The multilateral sphere refers to the interactions and relationships that occur between multiple states or international actors, often facilitated through international organizations, treaties, and alliances. In this context, a nation's identity plays a crucial role in shaping its approach to multilateral engagement. A state's self-concept (its values, norms, and historical experiences) guides its participation in international organizations and influences its stance on global

multilateralism offers a stage upon which states can project and negotiate their identities, thereby reinforcing their roles within the international system (Wendt, 1999).

In the discipline of IR, identity is not merely an accumulation of cultural symbols or historical memories but is fundamental to a state's "ontological security" — a term that emphasizes the importance of a stable, consistent sense of self. As Giddens (1991) posits, ontological security is "a sense of continuity and order in events," allowing both individuals and collectives to construct stable self-narratives amidst an otherwise volatile international environment (Steele, 2008). For states, this quest for ontological security translates into a foreign policy that reinforces a consistent self-identity, shaping responses to threats and opportunities within a coherent framework (Steele, 2008). In this paper, I aim to unpack the concept of ontological security, exploring its significance within IR and illustrating how a nation's historical experiences shape its ontological security. I will demonstrate how ontological security is essential for a nation to navigate effectively within the anarchic landscape of IR, and how a nation's past is essential to shape its ontological security, using India as a key exemplar.

Ontological Security: Relevance in IR

Ontological security is fundamentally rooted in metaphysical inquiries[16] into the nature of existence and the self's relationship to the world. To begin, let's first consider the metaphysical structure of the world, as it underpins any concept of ontological security. The metaphysical structure of the world refers to the fundamental nature and organisation of reality (French, 2014). Philosophically, the world comprises entities that are both tangible (like physical objects) and intangible (such as beliefs, values, and identity constructs) (Rudolff, 2010). The world's structure, therefore, includes a vast web of interdependent realities: objective structures (natural laws, physical objects), intersubjective frameworks (shared beliefs, cultural norms), and subjective perceptions (individual consciousness and identity) (Rudolff, 2010). Ontological security, in this context, emerges as an agent's need to establish a stable understanding of these layers of reality, especially as they pertain to one's place within them (Mitzen, 2006). For the metaphysical structure to be fully coherent, the following conditions must be met:

---

issues. This identity shapes how a nation aligns with others, how it advocates for specific policies, and how it navigates power dynamics within multilateral forums. Nations often seek to project their identities through their roles in international treaties and alliances, which can enhance their legitimacy and influence on the global stage.

[16]Metaphysical inquiries refer to philosophical investigations into the fundamental nature of reality, existence, and the relationships between entities. These inquiries often explore abstract concepts such as being, identity, time, space, and causality, seeking to understand the underlying principles that govern the universe and human experience. In the context of International Relations (IR), metaphysical inquiries may involve examining the ontological and epistemological assumptions that shape a nation's identity and foreign policy. Such inquiries challenge conventional understandings and encourage deeper reflection on how states construct their narratives and perceive their roles in the global order.

▪ Internal Consistency

The world must operate in a logically consistent manner, where principles like causality [17] and coherence[18] apply universally (Wendt, 1999).

▪ Representational Correspondence:[19]

The structure should faithfully represent observable phenomena, allowing individuals to construct reliable, repeatable experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

To feel ontologically secure, individuals (or collectives like states) require a sense of continuity and stability within this metaphysical framework. Ontological security, then, is more than physical safety; it involves a deeply rooted assurance of being and identity (Giddens, 1991). This requires several conditions:

▪ Continuity of Self-Identity:

The individual/State must have a stable and continuous sense of self, grounded in biographical narratives[20] that affirm their identity (Giddens, 1991).

This includes a consistent understanding of their past, present, and future.

▪ Reliable Structure of Reality:

For ontological security to be possible, the world must appear logical and predictable. Events and actions should fit into a comprehensible framework, allowing individuals/states to trust that their environment will react in expected ways (Mitzen, 2006).

▪ Symbolic Frameworks:

Since identity is partially constructed through symbols (cultural, religious, national), an ontologically secure being needs a cohesive symbolic framework [21] that validates and reaffirms their identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

When these conditions are met, individuals or societies achieve ontological security, gaining a sense of stability and assurance in both their identity and their place within the world's metaphysical order (Steele,

---

[17] Causality refers to the relationship between cause and effect, exploring how one event (the cause) leads to another event (the effect). In the context of IR, causality can help analyse the impact of historical events, policies, or decisions on state behaviour and international dynamics.

[18] Coherence refers to the quality of being logically connected and consistent, where elements of a system or argument support one another in a unified manner. In IR, coherence can apply to a nation's foreign policy, where consistent values, narratives, and strategies reinforce its identity and objectives on the global stage. A coherent approach helps to build trust and legitimacy among international actors.

[19] Representational correspondence refers to the relationship between a representation (such as a theory, model, or narrative) and the reality it aims to depict. For IR, representational correspondence can be crucial for understanding how nations portray their identities, interests, and policies to both domestic

and international audiences. A strong correspondence enhances credibility and legitimacy, while discrepancies can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in international interactions.

[20] In IR, biographical narratives can be particularly significant for states, as they influence how nations construct their identities, justify their policies, and engage with other actors in the global arena. By framing their histories in specific ways, states can create compelling narratives that foster legitimacy and cohesion among their populations.

[21] Cohesive symbolic frameworks can significantly influence how states perceive themselves and others, shaping their foreign policies, diplomatic strategies, and national narratives. Such frameworks often draw on cultural, historical, and ideological elements that resonate with a community, facilitating social cohesion and collective identity.

2008). This sense of security is essential for agency[22], as it allows for a self-assured interaction with the world (Mitzen, 2006). Where IR is concerned, understanding ontological security and its role in IR requires dissecting it through various theoretical lenses within the discipline. Realism, for instance, traditionally asserts that states prioritize survival and power-maximization in an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979). This framework, however, often neglects how states construct and defend identities. Constructivism, by contrast, emphasizes ideational factors in shaping state behaviour, proposing that states operate within socially constructed identities and norms, which they seek to maintain even in the face of physical threats (Wendt, 1992).

It is important to note here that the concept of an ontologically secure nation revolves around the idea that a state, like an individual, seeks stability and continuity in its identity, narrative, and role within the international system (Mitzen, 2006). This pursuit is not just about physical security or territorial integrity but rather about maintaining a consistent self-

conception amidst external pressures and existential threats (Steele, 2008).

Ontological Security and India's Foreign Policy Trajectory

India's trajectory in the realm of foreign policy has been emblematic of an enduring quest for autonomy, decisively shaped by a historical continuum and a civilizational ethos that predate modern statehood. Here, I explore how India's foreign policy post-independence manifested a unique and independent stance, notably through the non-aligned movement (NAM) and a pursuit of strategic autonomy [23] , culminating today in "Atmanirbharta"[24]. I posit that the ontological security of India as a nation-state (a sense of self-assurance in its identity and global role) stems fundamentally from its civilizational legacy, which underpins its policies and renders its foreign engagements distinctively Indian. As has been discussed above, ontological security, at its core, refers to an entity's deep-seated need for a stable sense of self and identity within the broader metaphysical framework of existence (Giddens, 1991). For a state, ontological security entails the projection of a

---

[22] "Agency" is crucial for understanding how states, non-state actors, and individuals navigate complex political environments, make decisions, and pursue their interests. Agency can be constrained by various factors, such as social structures, cultural norms, or institutional frameworks, but it remains a fundamental aspect of political behaviour and identity formation.

[23] This concept emphasizes the importance of self-determination and flexibility in navigating international relations, allowing states to pursue their national interests while maintaining a degree of freedom from hegemonic powers or global trends. In practice, strategic autonomy may involve cultivating diverse partnerships, enhancing domestic capabilities, and asserting a distinctive identity on the global stage. The concept is particularly relevant in a multipolar world,

where states seek to balance their interests amidst competing influences.

[24] In India, Atmanirbharta has gained prominence as a national policy aimed at reducing dependency on foreign imports and enhancing domestic production capabilities across various sectors, including defence, manufacturing, and agriculture. This approach emphasizes the importance of indigenous innovation, resource utilization, and sustainable development, aligning with the broader goal of building a resilient economy. The concept is also linked to India's aspirations for strategic autonomy in the global arena, where it seeks to assert its identity and priorities while navigating international relations.

consistent narrative, one rooted in both historical authenticity and contemporary relevance, which secures its identity amidst global flux (Mitzen, 2006).

India's Civilizational Legacy as the Bedrock of its Ontological Security

So is India ontologically secure? I posit that it is. It can be corroborated by the fact that its ontological security finds its foundation in its millennia-old civilisation, where continuity in cultural, philosophical, and social structures has cultivated a national psyche resilient to pre-colonial invasions, colonial disruptions[25] and post-colonial pressures [26]. Post-independence, this collective memory and historical identity endowed India with a confidence in navigating global politics autonomously, resistant to hegemonic affiliations[27],

that is reflective of its intrinsic values (Wendt, 1999). India's civilisational legacy extends beyond mere antiquity; it embodies a pluralistic, philosophical corpus that valorises autonomy and balance. Vedic philosophy, emphasising "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah"[28], "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"[29], and non-interference, crystallised a worldview oriented towards inclusivity and balance rather than dominance or subservience (Nehru, 1946). India's present-day ontological security is also reinforced by profound contributions to the ancient world in diverse fields such as medicine, literature, astronomy, religion, mathematics, economics, statecraft, and more. These ancient contributions resonate globally and provide India with a distinct sense of historical identity, allowing it to navigate modern challenges with a

---

[25] They primarily stem from British colonialism, which led to profound transformations in Indian society, economy, and governance. These disruptions included the dismantling of traditional industries, the imposition of foreign economic policies that favoured British interests, the restructuring of social hierarchies, and the introduction of new legal and educational systems. The colonial period also saw resistance movements that sought to reclaim autonomy and assert Indian identity, ultimately culminating in the struggle for independence. The legacies of these disruptions continue to influence contemporary Indian society, shaping its political discourse, economic policies, and cultural identities.

[26] In the context of India, postcolonial pressures manifest in several ways, such as the struggle to forge a national identity amidst diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, the need to address historical injustices and inequalities, and the ongoing impact of global economic forces that may perpetuate neo-colonial dynamics. Additionally, postcolonial pressures can include the expectations from the international community regarding governance, human rights, and development, which can complicate domestic policy-making. Navigating these pressures requires a balance between embracing global integration and asserting national sovereignty.

[27] Hegemonic affiliations often align with the influence of a dominant power or set of values that shape the behaviour and

policies of other states, particularly in a hierarchical world order. These affiliations can manifest in various forms, such as military alliances, economic partnerships, or cultural influences, and are often characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics. In the context of India, hegemonic affiliations can be seen in its interactions with global powers, such as the United States or China, and how these relationships influence India's strategic autonomy, foreign policy choices, and identity formation. Understanding hegemonic affiliations helps to elucidate the complexities of power relations in the international system and the ways in which smaller states navigate these dynamics.

[28] "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah" is a Sanskrit phrase that translates to "May all be happy" or "May all beings be happy." It is often used in Indian philosophical and spiritual contexts to express a universal aspiration for the well-being and happiness of all living beings.

[29] "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" is a Sanskrit phrase that translates to "The world is one family." This concept reflects the idea of universal brotherhood and interconnectedness, emphasizing that all human beings belong to a single global community. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, this notion promotes values of empathy, compassion, and mutual respect among diverse cultures and peoples.

consciousness deeply rooted in its past. The same is explained as follows:

- Medicine:

India's advancements in medicine trace back to the Ayurvedic[30] and Siddha[31] systems, which are among the oldest healing practices known to humanity. The foundational texts, such as Charaka Samhita [32] and Sushruta Samhita,[33] outlined methods for diagnosis, surgical procedures, and herbal treatments (Mukhopadhyaya, 2019). Charaka's [34] theories on physiology and Sushruta's [35] pioneering work in surgery (especially rhinoplasty and cataract surgery) contributed to the foundations of modern medicine ((Dave et al., 2024). Ayurveda's holistic approach to wellness has seen a global resurgence, emphasising preventive healthcare, which remains highly relevant in contemporary times.

- Literature:

India's rich literary tradition, notably the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, and Ramayana, provided philosophical and ethical frameworks that continue to influence Indian society. The Bhagavad Gita,[36] a part of the Mahabharata, is an enduring spiritual text, inspiring scholars and thinkers worldwide on topics of ethics, duty, and existential purpose (Choudhary & Prabha, 2023). The Sanskrit language, with its precision and complexity, influenced linguistics and continues to inspire research on artificial languages and computational linguistics.

---

[30] The term "Ayurvedic" refers to Ayurveda, an ancient system of medicine that originated in India over 3,000 years ago. The word "Ayurveda" is derived from Sanskrit, where "Ayur" means "life" and "Veda" means "knowledge" or "science." Ayurveda emphasizes a holistic approach to health, focusing on balancing the body, mind, and spirit through natural remedies, dietary practices, and lifestyle modifications.

[31] "Siddha" refers to an ancient system of medicine that originated in South India, closely related to Ayurveda but distinct in its methodologies and practices. Siddha medicine is based on the belief that human beings can attain physical and spiritual perfection through the cultivation of certain skills and knowledge, referred to as "Siddhi." The system emphasizes the balance of bodily humors (known as "thodams"), the importance of herbal and mineral remedies, and holistic approaches to health and wellness.

[32] "Charaka Samhita" is one of the foundational texts of Ayurveda, attributed to the ancient sage Charaka. Composed around the 2nd century BCE to the 2nd century CE, it is a comprehensive treatise on medicine, encompassing various aspects of healthcare, including diagnosis, treatment, and the principles of health maintenance.

[33] "Sushruta Samhita" is one of the oldest and most important texts in the field of surgery and medicine within Ayurveda, attributed to the ancient physician Sushruta. Composed around the 6th century BCE, it is renowned for its systematic approach to surgical techniques and the treatment of various ailments.

[34] Charaka is a revered ancient Indian physician and philosopher, best known for his contributions to Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine in India.

[35] Sushruta is an ancient Indian physician and surgeon, often regarded as the "Father of Surgery" in the context of Ayurveda. He is traditionally credited with authoring the "Sushruta Samhita," a seminal text that serves as a comprehensive guide to surgical techniques, anatomy, and patient care.

[36] Gita emphasizes the importance of duty (dharma), righteousness, and the pursuit of self-realization, making it a foundational text in Hindu philosophy. Its teachings have resonated across cultures and continue to be studied for their insights into ethics, spirituality, and the human condition.

- Astronomy:

Ancient Indian astronomers like Aryabhata [37] and Varahamihira [38] developed significant astronomical models. Aryabhata's work on the heliocentric system and his approximation of π (pi) contributed substantially to the field (Pingree, 1970). His texts on planetary motion and eclipses predate similar discoveries by Western astronomers, highlighting India's early understanding of astronomical phenomena. Varahamihira's compendium, Brihat Samhita, [39] offered insights into astrology, meteorology, and hydrology, concepts that find applications in modern sciences even today.

- Religion and Philosophy:

India's contributions to world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) have shaped global spiritual discourse. Hinduism introduced concepts of dharma (duty), karma (action), and moksha (liberation) which resonate universally, while Buddhism's focus on mindfulness and the Four Noble Truths [40] has gained immense popularity as a philosophical and meditative practice worldwide (King, 1999). The Vedanta[41] and Yoga philosophies continue to influence contemporary metaphysical and wellness practices, fortifying India's identity as a spiritual and philosophical guide.

- Chess:

The game of Chaturanga,[42] which originated in ancient India, is the precursor to modern chess. Symbolic of strategic thought, this game influenced global strategy and board games. The rules of Chaturanga emphasised foresight, patience, and strategic maneuvering, qualities that are crucial in modern-day decision-making and strategic planning (Murray, 1913).

---

[37] Influential ancient Indian mathematician and astronomer, recognized for his pioneering contributions to the fields of mathematics and astronomy. He is best known for his work, the 'Aryabhatiya', which covers various mathematical concepts, including the place value system, arithmetic, algebra, and trigonometry, as well as astronomical calculations.

[38] Prominent Indian astronomer, mathematician, and astrologer, known for his extensive contributions to the fields of astronomy and astrology. He is best recognized for his seminal work, the Brihat Samhita, which is an encyclopaedic text encompassing various subjects, including astronomy, astrology, meteorology, and architecture.

[39] The 'Brihat Samhita' is a comprehensive ancient Indian text written by the astronomer and astrologer Varahamihira in the 6th century CE. It serves as an encyclopaedic guide encompassing various disciplines, including astronomy, astrology, meteorology, architecture, and agriculture.

[40] The Four Noble Truths are fundamental principles in Buddhism that outline the nature of suffering and the path to liberation. They are Dukkha (Suffering), Samudaya (Origin of Suffering), Nirodha (Cessation of Suffering), Magga (Path to the Cessation of Suffering).

[41] "Vedanta" literally means "the end of the Vedas," signifying its roots in the Vedic texts. It addresses fundamental questions regarding the nature of reality, the self (atman), and the ultimate truth (Brahman).

[42] Ancient Indian strategy game that is considered a precursor to modern chess. The name "Chaturanga" translates to "four divisions of the military," referring to the four types of units in the game: infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots. This game is believed to have originated in India around the 6th century CE and was played on an 8x8 board, similar to contemporary chess.

- Mathematics:

Indian mathematicians like Brahmagupta[43], Bhaskara II,[44] and Aryabhata[45] laid foundational principles in arithmetic, algebra, and trigonometry. The concept of zero as a numeral, an idea developed in India, revolutionized mathematics and computational sciences, with Brahmagupta formalizing operations on zero and negative numbers (Joseph, 2010).

Pingala's binary system [46] and Sanskrit algorithms anticipated developments that later became essential to digital computing and coding. These contributions underscore India's foundational role in mathematical theory and its applications.

- Economics and Statecraft:

Ancient Indian treatises on economics and governance, notably Kautilya's Arthashastra, [47] are seminal texts that delve into politics, economics, and military strategy. Kautilya's principles on diplomacy, espionage, and resource management provided a

sophisticated framework for governance and economic stability (Boesche, 2002). These ideas on realpolitik[48] and statecraft resonate today, as they align with India's contemporary approach to strategic autonomy and economic self-reliance.

- Metallurgy and Engineering.

Ancient Indian metallurgy showcased remarkable advancements, exemplified by the Iron Pillar of Delhi, which resists corrosion even after centuries. This metallurgical expertise extended to crafting high-quality steel, today known in its anglicised form as Wootz steel, [49] which was highly valued and exported worldwide, especially for weapons (Ranganathan, 1985). Such engineering feats, coupled with architectural marvels like the Ellora and Ajanta caves, [50] highlight India's innovative spirit and technical prowess.

---

[43] Influential ancient Indian mathematician and astronomer who made significant contributions to mathematics, particularly in the fields of algebra and number theory.

[44] Also known as Bhaskara Acharya (1114-1185 CE), was a prominent Indian mathematician and astronomer renowned for his contributions to mathematics, particularly in algebra, calculus, and number theory.

[45] Renowned Indian mathematician and astronomer whose works significantly influenced the fields of mathematics and astronomy in ancient India and beyond.

[46] Pingala's system employs a binary scheme, using combinations of short (labelled as "1") and long (labelled as "0") syllables to form various metrical patterns. This can be seen as a precursor to modern binary arithmetic, where the presence or absence of a value is indicated by a binary digit. His use of binary in the context of poetry showcases a sophisticated understanding of mathematical patterns and their applications.

[47] The Arthashastra is an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, economics, and military strategy attributed to Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, who lived during the 4th century BCE. The text is considered one of the earliest and most comprehensive works on political science and realpolitik, outlining the principles of governance and the practical aspects of running a state.

[48] A political philosophy and approach that emphasizes pragmatic and practical considerations over ideological or ethical ones in politics and statecraft.

[49] Wootz steel is a legendary type of high-quality steel that originated in ancient India, particularly known for its unique properties and superior strength. The term "Wootz" is derived from the Tamil word "ukku," meaning steel.

[50] The Ellora and Ajanta Caves are renowned ancient caves that are UNESCO World Heritage Sites located in Maharashtra, India, celebrated for their remarkable rock-cut architecture, intricate sculptures, and exquisite paintings.

These profound civilizational contributions foster India's ontological security by providing a stable and cohesive narrative that celebrates resilience, innovation, philosophical and cultural richness that resonates even to this day. This rich heritage informs India's contemporary identity and fortifies its stance in the global arena, reinforcing an intrinsic sense of purpose and continuity. India's civilizational achievements allow it to present a unique narrative that transcends colonial histories, promoting a self-assured global presence rooted in ancient wisdom and modern adaptability. In essence, India's civilizational legacy not only underscores its identity but also reinforces its autonomy and capacity to navigate the international order independently. This ontological security (born from an enduring historical consciousness) empowers India to chart its path confidently, grounded in an unbroken continuum of intellectual and spiritual contributions.

This legacy rendered India's post-independence leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, acutely aware of their role not merely as statesmen but as custodians of a civilizational ethos. Consequently, India embraced non-alignment[51] as a strategic stance, steering clear of Cold War binaries that could compromise its autonomy (Ganguly, 2019). Non-alignment thus enabled India to engage with both blocs pragmatically while safeguarding its ontological security by aligning its foreign policy with intrinsic values rather than external pressures.

From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy: A Work in Progress

India's foreign policy, especially during the Cold War, demonstrates the relevance of ontological security in constructivist terms. Its commitment to non-alignment served as a framework to preserve its post-colonial identity and resist the ideological polarisation between the US and the Soviet Union. India's insistence on non-alignment was not a mere political expedient but a philosophical assertion of self-identity and civilizational maturity. In refusing to ally exclusively with either the United States or the Soviet Union, India exercised what would later be conceptualised as strategic autonomy, an articulation of its civilizational ethos transformed into realpolitik (Raghavan, 2017). Constructivists argue that this approach enabled India to project itself as a morally autonomous state, resisting superpower pressures while promoting principles of sovereignty and self-determination (Mohan, 2003).

As India transitioned from the Cold War era to the post-liberalization period of the 1990s, its ontological security imperatives evolved, influenced by economic liberalization and a redefined strategic posture. The concept of strategic autonomy evolved from non-alignment, maturing as India encountered new global dynamics and regional imperatives. It denoted a state's ability to make decisions independently, guided by self-interest and unhampered by external hegemonies.

---

[51] Non-Alignment refers to a foreign policy strategy that advocates for maintaining independence from major power blocs and avoiding alignment with either of the dominant military alliances, particularly during the Cold War era. The concept emerged in the context of decolonization and the desire of newly independent nations to assert their sovereignty and avoid being drawn into the ideological and military conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union.

For India, the continuity in strategic autonomy from non-alignment reflected a seamless adaptation of its civilizational tenets into the post-colonial era, allowing it to act as a sovereign entity on the global stage.

This shift toward strategic autonomy responded to internal pressures for economic reform and external demands for a stronger defence posture, illustrating India's aspiration to engage globally without compromising its unique identity as a sovereign actor (Cohen & Dasgupta, 2010). India's nuclear policy exemplifies this balance between physical and ontological security. Following nuclear tests in 1998, India asserted itself as a nuclear power while pledging "no first use" of nuclear weapons, signifying a desire for both strength and responsibility (Tellis, 2001). India's contemporary doctrine of strategic autonomy enables it to engage with both the United States and Russia while asserting its independence in defence policies, reinforcing its self-image as a flexible yet self-determined actor (Pant, 2017).

India's recent stance on key issues, such as its non-aligned posture in the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas-Palestine imbroglio, US-Iran relations, strategic neutrality on US-China tensions, and calibrated responses to regional threats, is emblematic

of this autonomy (Taneja, 2024). By asserting its sovereignty in these instances, India has preserved its ontological security, refusing to capitulate to polarising pressures that could disrupt its narrative of self-reliance and neutrality. Strategic autonomy, therefore, is not merely a policy stance but an ontological choice, a means to safeguard India's narrative of independence against the homogenising tendencies of global powers (Chacko, 2012).

Strategic Balance through Ontological Security: A Pragmatic Approach

India's diplomatic engagements in QUAD, [52] BRICS,[53] ASEAN,[54] and SCO[55] are underpinned by a pragmatic balancing strategy that seeks to navigate the complexities of IR while reinforcing its ontological security. This balancing act is characterised by a judicious assessment of national interests, wherein India prioritises economic development, regional stability, and cultural diplomacy. The Latin phrase Cui Bono? (Who benefits?) aptly encapsulates India's approach, as it meticulously evaluates the implications of its multilateral engagements in the context of its national identity and security. In pursuing its strategic interests, India remains cognizant of the need for flexibility and adaptability in its foreign policy. The integration of ontological security into this balancing

---

[52] Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, is a strategic alliance involving the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, established to promote security and economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

[53] An association of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Established in 2009 it aims to promote peace, security, and development and to challenge Western dominance in global financial and political institutions.

[54] A regional organization founded in 1967 to promote economic, political, and security cooperation among its ten Southeast Asian member states, including Indonesia, Malaysia,

the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. ASEAN aims to foster regional stability, accelerate economic growth, and create a platform for addressing shared issues such as trade, security, and cultural exchange.

[55] A Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance founded in 2001 by China, Russia, and four Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan joined as full members in 2017. The SCO focuses on combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism, as well as enhancing economic cooperation and cultural exchanges across the Eurasian region.

strategy emphasizes the importance of a stable national identity in an ever-evolving geopolitical landscape. India seeks to assert its identity as a regional and global actor through active participation in these multilateral forums, thereby reinforcing its narrative of being a stabilizing force in a multipolar world. The synthesis of these memberships reflects a broader vision where power dynamics are fluid, and alliances are contingent upon shared interests. India's diplomatic maturity lies in its ability to engage constructively with disparate blocs while retaining its strategic autonomy, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of over-reliance on any single partnership. By prioritizing strategic balance (brought about by being ontologically secure), India not only addresses immediate geopolitical challenges but also crafts a coherent identity that resonates across its diverse engagements, reinforcing its commitment to a stable and prosperous regional order.

Atmanirbharta: The Culmination of Civilizational Self-Reliance

The doctrine of "Atmanirbharta," or self-reliance, has recently crystallised into a core strategic vision under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, encapsulating India's ambition to minimise foreign dependence while nurturing indigenous capabilities across critical sectors such as defence, technology, and infrastructure (Roy, 2021). This drive towards self-sufficiency is far from a modern construct; it resonates deeply with

India's civilizational ethos, which has long emphasised self-sustenance and communal resilience. Modi's government has championed Atmanirbharta, presenting it as not merely an economic policy but a return to India's philosophical roots. His initiatives, such as "Make in India" and "Digital India," have invigorated domestic industries, aiming to establish India as a global manufacturing hub and a leader in digital technology, consistent with the nation's enduring values of self-reliance and innovation (DIPP, 2014).

In the defence sector, for instance, Modi's push for Atmanirbharta has yielded the indigenously developed Tejas fighter jet [56] and the INS Vikrant aircraft carrier,[57] which symbolise India's growing military autonomy and strategic capability (MoD Press, 2022).

---

[56] The Tejas is an indigenously developed multi-role light combat aircraft (LCA). The Tejas program aims to enhance India's defence self-sufficiency and reduce reliance on foreign fighter jets, aligning with the nation's Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) goals.

[57] India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, developed by Cochin Shipyard Limited and commissioned into the Indian Navy in 2022. The development of INS Vikrant marks a significant achievement in India's Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) initiative by bolstering the nation's maritime security through domestic production

Similarly, the launch of the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) Chandrayaan [58] and Mangalyaan [59] missions underscore the role of Atmanirbharta in India's pursuit of technological independence, showcasing indigenous prowess in space exploration (ISRO, 2019). Modi's vision has also targeted economic resilience through initiatives like "Vocal for Local," [60] (PMO, 2020) which encourages citizens to support domestic products, reinforcing the idea that self-reliance extends beyond mere production to cultural pride and collective self-definition.

Atmanirbharta, under Modi's leadership, marks a transformative moment where India's ontological security is further bolstered by acting as a bulwark against external dependencies, making it actively assertive in key policy issues where foreign policy is concerned, helping it in building a future where self-reliance aligns with economic, technological, and cultural integrity. In this endeavour, India reaffirms a legacy of resilience, adaptability and continuity (key for being ontologically secure), where ancient principles of autonomy and plurality find new expression in modern aspirations.

Conclusion:

In the foregoing discussion, I have attempted to show that India's ontological security, underpinned by its ancient civilizational moorings, has been indispensable in enabling it to navigate the turbulent waters of the international order with a foreign policy that is uniquely autonomous and un-swayed by hegemonic pressures. This secure identity, intricately woven from a tapestry of profound philosophical, scientific, and cultural achievements, has empowered India to exercise strategic autonomy from independence through to the present era. Such a deeply embedded ontological foundation confers upon India a sovereign trajectory, enabling it to assert an independent stance, even within a global arena often besieged by shifting allegiances and demands for conformity. I further argue that the ontological stability that India derives from its ancient civilizational corpus is an enduring wellspring of epistemic and spiritual continuity.

---

[58] Chandrayaan is India's lunar exploration program launched by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The latest mission, Chandrayaan-3, launched in 2023, successfully achieved a soft landing on the Moon's south pole, making India the first country to reach this region. The Chandrayaan program underscores India's advancements in space exploration and its capability for complex interplanetary missions.

[59] Also known as the Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM), is India's first interplanetary mission to Mars, developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Launched in 2013, it successfully entered Mars' orbit in 2014, making India the first Asian nation to reach Mars and the first country in the world to

do so on its first attempt. The mission was designed to study the Martian atmosphere, surface, and mineral composition. Remarkably cost-effective, Mangalyaan demonstrated India's growing prowess in space technology and mission planning, earning global recognition for ISRO's achievements.

[60] The initiative aims to bolster domestic industries, enhance employment opportunities, and reduce dependency on foreign products by fostering a culture of self-reliance and supporting local artisans, manufacturers, and small businesses. It represents a push towards economic resilience by celebrating and strengthening India's local production capacity.

The holistic principles embedded in the Ayurvedic and Siddha medical systems, alongside the spiritual and philosophical profundities enshrined in the Vedas, Upanishads, and epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, underscore a self-sustaining ethos that has permeated Indian society for millennia and continues to have an impact in the policies that are conceived even to this day, for, these textual and metaphysical frameworks, far from being relics of a bygone era, continue to function as active repositories of ethical and moral frameworks that shape India's national consciousness. Such a rooted consciousness has provided a locus for India to assert its identity on the world stage, with the authority of a civilisation that is both ancient and dynamic, which has shaped the world through its contributions, which still holds credence even today. For e.g. contributions in mathematics and astronomy, as seen in Aryabhata's heliocentric postulations and Brahmagupta's conceptualisation of zero, not only revolutionised the field of mathematics but also illustrated an indigenous epistemological orientation that transcended imported paradigms. This intrinsic intellectual autonomy has reverberated through centuries, informing India's contemporary approach to technological self-reliance and scientific inquiry.

The ontological confidence derived from such profound contributions has allowed India to pursue Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India), thus reflecting a long-standing impulse toward strategic and intellectual sovereignty. Religion and philosophy have further fortified India's ontological edifice. The emergence of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, its own brand of Christianity (as followed in Kerala), and later Sikhism and Sufism introduced to the world an esoteric repository of thought centred on concepts of dharma, karma, and moksha, imbuing Indian society with a unique spiritual self-awareness. These ontological foundations in the spiritual realm provided a metaphysical orientation that resisted colonial homogenization and has subsequently allowed India to project a stable and self-assured identity in the international arena. Through these religious and philosophical traditions, India has maintained an unwavering posture of non-alignment and self-definition, asserting a foreign policy that is neither beholden to Western nor Eastern ideological imperatives but rather arises from an intrinsic ethos.

The ancient Indian strategic lexicon - represented in the game of Chaturanga (chess) and in Kautilya's Arthashastra - contributes to a long-standing tradition of foresight and statecraft, providing a nuanced understanding of diplomacy and governance that remains relevant in India's approach to foreign policy. Such strategic acumen informs contemporary Indian diplomacy, reinforcing its non-aligned stance and commitment to sovereign decision-making amidst fluctuating global alignments.

I conclude by emphasising that India's ontological security, emanating from its rich civilizational heritage, functions as a stabilising axis in its foreign policy, fostering a continuity of purpose and identity that transcends temporal geopolitical constraints. This enduring legacy confers upon India an ontological resilience that empowers it to assert an autonomous foreign policy, rooted not in transient allegiances but in the immutable profundities of an ancient civilisation.

References

Adler, E., & Barnett, M. (1998). Security communities. Cambridge University Press. (United Kingdom)

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books. (United States)

Boesche, R. (2002). The first great political realist: Kautilya and his Arthashastra. Lexington Books. (United States)

Campbell, D. (1998). Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity. University of Minnesota Press. (United States)

Chacko, P. (2012). Indian foreign policy: The politics of postcolonial identity from 1947 to 2004. Routledge. (United Kingdom)

Cohen, S. P., & Dasgupta, S. (2010). Arming without aiming: India's military modernization. Brookings Institution Press. (United States)

French, S. (2014). The structure of the world: Metaphysics and representation. Oxford University Press (USA)

Ganguly, S. (2019). India's foreign policy: Retrospect and prospect. Oxford University Press. (United Kingdom)

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age. Stanford University Press. (United States)

Joseph, G. G. (2010). The crest of the peacock: Non-European roots of mathematics. Princeton University Press. (United States)

King, R. (1999). Indian philosophy: An introduction to Hindu and Buddhist thought. Edinburgh University Press. (United Kingdom)

Murray, H. J. R. (1913). A history of chess. Clarendon Press. (United Kingdom)

Mohan, C. R. (2003). Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy. Viking. (India)

Mohanty, P. (2021). An Unkept promise: What derailed the Indian economy (AatmaNirbhar Bharat: Turning the clock back). SAGE Publishing India.

Nehru, J. (1946). The discovery of India. Oxford University Press. (United Kingdom)

Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. Public Affairs. (United States)

Pant, H. V. (2017). Indian foreign policy: An overview. Manchester University Press. (United Kingdom)

Pyle, K. B. (2007). Japan rising: The resurgence of Japanese power and purpose. PublicAffairs. (United States)

Ranganathan, S. (1985). Wootz steel: An advanced material of the ancient world. Transactions of the Indian Institute of Metals, 38(4), 273-282. (India)

Steele, B. J. (2008). Ontological security in international relations: Self-identity and the IR state. Routledge. United Kingdom.

Tellis, A. J. (2001). India's emerging nuclear posture: Between recessed deterrent and ready arsenal (No. 1127). RAND Corporation. (United States)

Waltz, K. (1979). Theory of international politics. McGraw-Hill. (United States)

Wendt, A. (1999). Social theory of international politics. Cambridge University Press. (United Kingdom)

Mitzen, J. (2006). Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma. European Journal of International Relations, 12(3), 341–370. (United Kingdom)

Pingree, D. (1970). History of mathematical astronomy in India. Journal of the American Oriental Society, 90(1), 6-30. (United States)

Dave, T., Habte, A., Vora, V., Sheikh, M. Q., Sanker, V., & Gopal, S. V. (2024). Sushruta: The father of Indian surgical history. Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Global Open, 12(4), e5715. https://doi.org/10.1097/GOX.0000000000005715

Choudhary, M., & Prabha, G. (2023). The Bhagavad Gita's educational philosophy: Nurturing holistic growth, self-realization, and ethical values. Bhartiyam International Journal of Education & Research, 12(4), 23. (India)

Mukhopadhyaya, G. (2019). Ayurveda: The science of life. In Ayurvedic medicine (pp. 1-20). Springer. (Germany)

Raghavan, P. S. (2017). The making of India's foreign policy: From non-alignment to multi-alignment. Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, 12(4), 326–341.

Sharma, G. D. (2000). India's strategic autonomy in the new world order. Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS).(India)

Taneja, K. (2024). India balances interests amidst Israel-Iran tensions. Expert Speak Raisina Debates. Observer Research Foundation.

Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. International Organization, 46(2), 391-425. (United States)

Department of Industrial Policy & Promotion. (2014). Make in India. Government of India. Retrieved from https://www.makeinindia.com

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). (2019). Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan missions. ISRO Official Website. Retrieved from https://www.isro.gov.in

Ministry of Defence, Government of India. (2022). INS Vikrant and Tejas: Indigenous defense production. New Delhi: Ministry of Defence Press. (India)

Office of the Prime Minister of India. (2020). Vocal for local: Enhancing India's economic resilience. Retrieved from https://www.pmindia.gov.in

Rudolff, B. (2010). 'Intangible 'and' tangible 'heritage: a topology of culture in context of faith (Doctoral dissertation, Mainz, Univ., Diss., 2007)